

# District Administrator Perspectives on Student Learning in an Era of Standards and Accountability: A Collective Frame Analysis

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Our analysis explores the agenda for student learning communicated in interviews with school district officials from four Ontario districts. Using research methods drawn from collective action framing theory, we identified six core frames and one broader frame in the discourse on student learning: (a) measureable academic achievement, (b) personalized preparation for post-secondary destinations, (c) a well-rounded education, (d) personal development, (e) faith/values-based education, (f) social identity development, and (g) developing the whole child (the broader frame). The analysis highlights the administrators' advocacy for a more encompassing educational agenda than that mandated by government curriculum and accountability policies, and the utility of framing theory for education policy analysis.

Key words: school district administrators, accountability, learning, policy analysis, curriculum analysis

Les auteurs analysent les priorités des administrateurs de commissions scolaires quant à l'apprentissage des élèves telles qu'elles ressortent des entrevues menées dans quatre commissions scolaires en Ontario. À l'aide de méthodes de recherche tirées de la théorie du cadrage de l'action collective, les auteurs ont identifié six cadres clés et un cadre plus vaste dans le discours des administrateurs de commissions scolaires sur l'apprentissage des élèves : (a) le rendement scolaire mesurable, (b) la préparation personnalisée pour le postsecondaire, (c) une éducation complète, (d) le développement personnel, (e) une éducation reposant sur la foi/des valeurs, (f) le développement de l'identité personnelle et (g) le développement de l'enfant dans toutes ses dimensions (le cadre plus vaste). L'analyse met en lumière le combat des administrateurs pour une orientation plus englobante que celle que prescrit le gouvernement dans les curriculums et les politiques en matière d'imputabilité ainsi que l'utilité de la théorie du cadrage dans l'étude des politiques en matière d'éducation.

Mots clés : administrateurs d'arrondissement scolaire, imputabilité, apprentissage, analyse de politiques, analyse d'un curriculum.

School district leaders are expected to develop consensus around district goals and priorities for action. This responsibility implies more than simply specifying district visions, goals, and plans. It involves trying to influence the thinking and actions of local stakeholders (e.g., principals, teachers, parents) towards the collective accomplishment of those directions (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). In that sense, we conceptualize this kind of district level activity as aimed at creating and leading a local social movement, focused on a shared understanding of and commitment to district goals and plans. Contemporary government-mandated education standards and accountability-based policies are clearly intended to influence what local educators identify as the primary goals for student learning and the focus for district and school-level efforts to improve student learning. The extent to which the thoughts and actions of local education leaders about student learning goals and needs for improvement are actually framed in terms of government policies or in terms of other agendas for student learning is, however, not well known.

In this article, we examine school district administrator discourse around student learning in the context of provincial curriculum and student performance standards and accountability systems. The Ontario Ministry of Education has supported since 1996 the development and implementation of a core outcomes and standards-based curriculum, curriculum-aligned standardized tests, and provincially defined targets for student performance under successive Conservative and Liberal governments. Using interview data from 14 administrators from four Ontario school districts (public and Catholic, English and French), we investigated the core themes in this framing discourse, and variability in the content and construction of this discourse within and across settings.<sup>1</sup> We apply theoretical concepts and analytical methods more commonly

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used in the study of collective action frames and framing processes associated with social policy movements (Benford & Snow, 2000; Creed, Langstratt, & Scully, 2002).

#### DISTRICT DIRECTION SETTING AS COLLECTIVE ACTION FRAMING

Research on the influence of school district leaders on school effectiveness and improvement consistently emphasizes the centrality of district administrator beliefs about and commitments to goals for student learning (e.g., Waters & Marzano, 2006; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Less well explored is how central office leaders frame those ideas into system-wide agendas for collective action and what accounts for differences in those views (e.g., Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Spillane, 2002). In this analysis, we focus on how district administrators frame the local agenda for student learning: goals, status of current performance, causes, needs for intervention, actions to be taken.

The analysis presented here uses concepts and methods from framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000) to describe the discursive content and relationships among alternative frames that district administrators employed to articulate the agenda for student learning. Collective action frames are "collections of idea elements tied together by a unifying concept" (Snow & Benford, cited in Creed, Langstratt & Scully, 2002, p. 37) that serve to define, explain, and motivate people to action on a social policy issue. Frame analysis can focus on the ideas that make up a frame, the discursive strategies that people use to construct the frame, use of the frames in social contexts to influence collective action, and the factors influencing frames and their use. Participants in the policy/action settings and discourse construct collective action frames in relation to core framing tasks associated with an issue of concern: (a) diagnostic framing (problem identification and attributions), (b) prognostic framing (articulating solutions), and (c) motivational framing (reasons for engaging in collective action). Frame analysts identify two categories of framing processes. First are discursive processes:

1. frame articulation (connecting different events/ideas into a coherent frame), and

2. frame punctuation (highlighting some key events/beliefs as salient and core to the frame).

Second, are four frame alignment or strategic processes:

1. frame bridging (linking two or more ideologically congruent but distinct frames),
2. frame amplification (emphasizing frame resonance with existing beliefs),
3. frame extension (linking frame to other stakeholder interests), and
4. frame transformation (changing old meanings/generating new ones)

Other scholars have used framing theory to analyze education policy debates related to specific issues, such as public funding for faith-based education in Ontario (Davies, 1999) or district-teacher labor negotiations in three Washington school districts (Veneske & Gates, 2007). We are not aware of a comparable analysis of how district administrators construe the discourse on student learning, although in a recent study Coburn, Touré and Yamashita (in press) employed framing theory over a three year period to analyze evidence used in one school district's decision-making related to instruction. Previously, Coburn (2006) applied framing theory to investigate how the principal and teachers in one elementary school interpreted and acted upon a state reading policy initiative. These studies provide significant insights into the (a) personal factors (e.g., professional beliefs and knowledge), (b) organizational factors (e.g., structural divisions and interactions within an organization, resource constraints), and (c) political factors and processes (e.g., positional authority and power, leadership turnover) that give rise to the articulation of specific diagnostic and prognostic frames, and that shape decision-making dynamics and outcomes involving competing frames over time. Spillane (1998, 2002) employed a sense-making perspective to analyze variability in the responses of district-level actors to state education policies. Social action framing and sense making are overlapping approaches to investigating a similar phenomenon, the former grounded more in sociological theory and the latter, more in cognitive psychology.

The analysis here offers insights into the discourse about student learning of central office administrators from a variety of school districts.

Further research along the lines exemplified by Coburn et al. (in press) would be required to understand how district administrators and other education stakeholders actually use the frames identified to influence policy decisions and actions related to student learning.

#### RESEARCH METHODS

The data for this analysis were gathered as part of a multi-method, multi-year investigation of provincial and school-district policy trends and their consequences for the work of school teachers and administrators across Canada. Related sub-studies charted provincial policy trends in Ontario from 1990 to 2006 (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2007), and followed the work lives and conditions of 100 teachers and principals from 24 schools in four Ontario school districts over the course of five years (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008). The districts included two English-medium school districts (one public, one Catholic), and two French-medium school districts (one public, one Catholic). The two English language districts are both situated in densely populated metropolitan communities, with high cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity. The two French language districts encompass wide geographic areas that include a full spectrum of urban, suburban, and rural communities. The francophone districts are also sites of increasing socio-cultural heterogeneity as a result of recent immigration from culturally diverse French-speaking regions of the world. Data for this analysis were taken from interviews in 2006 with district office administrators in these four districts. The interviews were designed to explore the role and effects of school district personnel as mediators of provincial policy and as sources of district policy affecting teachers and principals and student learning.

The interviews included questions about the prevailing views of student success in the district: understanding of student success, district goals and initiatives focused on student success, and key factors influencing its quality and distribution. Responses to these questions provided the content for this analysis. We refer to this discourse as *the agenda for student learning* as portrayed by the district leaders. Although the original study was not grounded in framing theory, we found framing analysis useful for capturing, interpreting, comparing, and discussing how district administrators talked about student learning.

We employed a collective frame analysis research procedure called a signature matrix (Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Creed et al., 2002), an analytical framework to sort related ideas from texts into sets of categories, including metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions and visual images, roots, consequences, and appeals to principle. The signature matrix enables an analyst to capture and portray the defining ideas of a core frame, as well as reasons used to justify the position represented by a frame (e.g., causal influences, effects, and moral arguments for collective social action). We began by identifying all comments from each respondent for each interview that pertained to student learning, and recording them in an overall signature matrix. We then looked across the respondent matrices within each district to see if particular sets of elements (e.g., metaphors, catchphrases, consequences) held together in coherent packages that could be represented as distinct frames. This analysis led us to identify a set of core frames concerning the agenda for student learning. We examined the distribution and emphasis given to the different frames in each district, as well as variability in the ideas within the frames across the interviews and districts.

#### ONTARIO ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY CONTEXT

The contemporary era of accountability for public education in Ontario is rooted in legislation (Bill 160: Education Quality Improvement Act) championed by a Conservative government in 1996 (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2007; Ben Jaafar & Anderson, 2006; Gidney, 1999). This omnibus legislation mandated the development of a standards-based provincial curriculum, with common content and performance standards for student learning outcomes defined by subject and by grade level, K-12. Bill 160 also mandated the creation of a provincial accountability bureau, the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), and authorized that Office to manage the development and implementation of provincially developed standardized tests of student learning in reading, writing, and mathematics at specific intervals (grades 3 and 6 in all subject areas, grade 9 mathematics, grade 10 literacy). The tests, aligned with the curriculum standards, are defined at four levels of performance.

The effects of the accountability system on public discussion about student learning and the quality of public education were just beginning

to be felt when the Liberal government came into power in 2003 (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2007). With regards to policies for the curriculum, standardized testing, and performance reporting, the Liberals took steps to improve upon and institutionalize the standards and test-based accountability system. They revised the tests and testing procedures in light of the recommendations from an independent evaluation. The most significant change in terms of accountability was the adoption of provincially mandated targets for student performance on provincial tests. Although the Conservative government set up the accountability system, it did not define what might count as acceptable performance at the aggregate level (school, district, province). Nor did it prescribe any consequences (rewards, sanctions, assistance) for schools or districts based on evidence from student performance on the accountability measures. Furthermore, the Conservatives did not hold the government itself accountable under the system for the quality of results at any level. The Liberal government set a province-wide target for 75 per cent of students taking the grade-6 literacy and numeracy tests to be performing by the end of 2008 at or above the minimum level of proficient performance on the tests. The government also set a secondary school graduation rate target of 85 per cent by 2012 (the percentage of grade-9 students graduating from high school in four years). The Liberals established a new branch of the Ministry of Education, the Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, with the mandate to provide leadership and assistance to school boards and schools to help achieve the provincial targets. By 2005 the Secretariat had introduced a number of initiatives to target additional support to schools that were not performing or improving at expected levels over consecutive years. For the first time in Ontario education history, schools and school boards were being held publicly accountable for measurable indicators of aggregate student performance.

The adoption of measurable indicators and targets for student performance by successive governments in Ontario marked a shift in how provincial goals for education were stated. In the mid-1970s the Ministry of Education published a list of 13 provincial goals of education (see Table 1). These goals, which appeared in provincial curriculum guide

Table 1  
Ontario's Goals of Education 1984-1995

Thirteen Goals of Education <i>O.S.I.S.</i> (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1984)	Ten Essential Outcomes <i>The Common Curriculum</i> (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1995)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. develop a responsiveness to the dynamic processes of learning</li> <li>2. develop resourcefulness, adaptability and creativity in learning and living</li> <li>3. acquire the basic knowledge and skills needed to comprehend and express ideas through words, numbers, and other symbols</li> <li>4. develop physical fitness and good health</li> <li>5. gain satisfaction from participating and from sharing the participation of others in various forms of artistic expression</li> <li>6. develop a feeling of self-worth</li> <li>7. develop an understanding of the role of the individual within the family and the role of the family within society</li> <li>8. acquire skills that contribute to self-reliance in solving practical problems in everyday life</li> <li>9. develop a sense of personal responsibility in society at the local, national, and international levels</li> <li>10. develop esteem for the customs, cultures, and beliefs of a wide variety of societal groups</li> <li>11. acquire skills and attitudes that will lead to satisfaction and productivity in the world of</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communicate effectively</li> <li>2. Solve problems &amp; make responsible decisions using critical &amp; creative thinking</li> <li>3. Use technology effectively</li> <li>4. Demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems.</li> <li>5. Apply the skills needed to work &amp; get along with other people.</li> <li>6. Participate as responsible citizens in the life of the local, national, &amp; global communities</li> <li>7. Explore educational &amp; career opportunities.</li> <li>8. Apply aesthetic judgment in everyday life.</li> <li>9. Make wise &amp; safe choices for healthy living.</li> <li>10. Use the skills of learning to learn more effectively.</li> </ol>



<p>work</p> <p>12. develop respect for the environment and a commitment to the wise use of resources</p> <p>13. develop values related to personal, ethical, or religious beliefs and to the common welfare of society</p>	
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lines and often displayed in the halls of schools, consisted of a set of broad statements reflecting multiple focuses of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that schools were expected to instill in students through the academic curriculum and co-curricular experiences. The 13 goals of education were replaced by “ten essential outcomes” in the NDP government Ministry’s *Common Curriculum* policy documents in the early 1990s (see Table 1). The Conservative government displaced these broad goals in the *Ontario Curriculum* by detailed subject- and grade-level learning outcomes and performance standards. The Liberals added the targets for individual and aggregate student performance at the school, district, and provincial levels.

This synopsis provides an overview of the provincial accountability context in which the district office administrators we interviewed spoke about their district agendas for student learning.

#### FRAMING THE AGENDA FOR STUDENT LEARNING

We identified six core frames in how district office administrators discussed student success and the district agendas for student learning: (a) measurable academic achievement, (b) personalized preparation for post-secondary destinations, (c) a well-rounded education, (d) personal development, (e) faith/values-based education, and (f) social identity development. Of these, measurable academic achievement stands out as the dominant student learning frame. The academic achievement and preparation for post-secondary destinations frames in the district administrators’ talk about student learning were the only two frames explicitly linked to provincial education policy. A comparison of these frames to the past statements of provincial goals of education in Table 1, however, shows that the central ideas around which our interviewees constructed

these and the other frames are not really new and that, historically, public school educators have conceived the agenda for student learning as multi-dimensional, encompassing a variety of purposes. Which student learning frames are currently advocated and given priority by school district leaders, and how they are articulated and understood, however, cannot be assumed from the past. We emphasize that a goal statement is not equivalent to a frame in the discourse on student learning, although a frame will likely include statements about goals as key ideas associated with the frame, and perhaps even as a label or catch-phrase for the frame.

In the following analysis we explain the core student learning frames that district administrators used, and we consider the framing processes employed in how they articulated those frames. Then we examine how they assembled various core frames (e.g., academic achievement, well-rounded education, personal development, faith/values education, and social identity development) into a broader frame that they characterized as developing the “whole child” or “la globalité d’être.” In framing theory, the whole child frame can be characterized as a master frame (not due to its dominance in the discourse, but rather to its breadth and inclusiveness). Our analysis of the whole child master frame considers the distinct repertoires of core frames encompassed in that discourse, and links to contextual factors such as type of school board and the communities they serve. Given the limits of our interview sample (e.g., number of settings, single stakeholder role), we do not claim that these frames encompass the entire discursive field of public dialogue on student learning in the education system in Ontario or Canada. It is, however, likely representative of the salient frames employed by Ontario school district administrators.

#### *The Core Frames*

*Measurable Academic Achievement.* All the district administrators that we interviewed identified the quality of student performance based on Ministry prescribed standards, indicators, and targets for student academic learning outcomes as a dominant frame to define the agenda for student learning. They highlighted this frame in terms of student performance on the province’s literacy and numeracy tests at grades 3, 6, 9, and 10, and

in terms of progress towards the attainment of the provincially mandated targets for aggregate proficient performance on the grade-6 tests and for high school retention and graduation rates. Some administrators characterized this frame with quantitative metaphors, for example,

- *"a mathematical approach to understanding student learning,"*
- *"c'est une statistique."*

When employing the measureable academic achievement frame, central office administrators routinely cited local evidence of student performance on the Ministry indicators and criteria for success at the aggregate level across the district, for example,

- *"the drop out rate is going down,"*
- *"a year ago our (test scores) had plateaued, now they are on the incline,"*
- *"Les élèves des conseils de langue française dans la région de Toronto ont les résultats aux tests les plus élevés."*

In two districts, the administrators, who singled out exemplary or struggling school sites in terms of the quality of student performance on these measures, were able to talk about teacher and administrator practices and beliefs associated with that performance.

When asked about the circumstances underlying and driving this emphasis on measureable student achievement, administrators in all districts named the Ministry and its accountability system, for example,

- *"we seem to be forced into a very mathematical approach of scores on standardized tests,"*
- *"of course, the emphasis on literacy and numeracy,"*
- *"je regarde le taux de diplomation, parce qu'il faut qu'on le regarde parce qu'il faut qu'on le fournisse au ministère."*

In two districts, the district administrators stated that the board and senior administration embraced the measurable achievement frame as a key priority and focus for district improvement, for example,

- *“it’s part of our system goals and priorities that students are at the center of it all, and student success right now,”*
- *“improve our EQAO scores, that’s the direction of our trustees (and our Director),”*
- *“la définition est dans le cadre d’imputabilité et de responsabilisation du Conseil, dans le sens que c’est clair là où on s’en va comme conseil scolaire.”*

Administrators in two districts elaborated and punctuated this frame beyond achieving desired test scores and performance targets. They talked about interpreting student academic gaps and needs for intervention through analysis of sub-group performance, for example,

- *“the gap between boy performance and girl performance is still there,”*

and item analysis of standardized test results data at the district and school levels:

- *“we have really moved into a very powerful data analysis tool. Now we can look at what kids are doing. We are getting interval data. We can see which area of the curriculum they are struggling most with and that really can become a focus of what we are doing.”*

In one of these districts, the administrators described the use of student test results for early identification of those at risk of future academic failure, for example,

- *“80 per cent of kids at provincial standard in grade 6 get OSSLT (Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test) the first time,”*
- *“around OSSLT, we are running Counting on You literacy initiatives for those kids that have been identified at Level 2.”*

In effect, district administrators in these settings extended the diagnostic frame of measurable academic achievement from assessing student performance levels in relation to government set standards to interpreting assessment data for school improvement planning and individual student interventions.

The district administrators attributed variability in student academic performance to a variety of key factors, including (a) parental involvement, (b) at-risk factors related to student family circumstances (e.g., poverty, limited proficiency in the language of instruction, recency of immigration to Canada), (c) instructional practices of teachers, (d) leadership practices of principals, and (e) educators' beliefs about the potential for success of all students. Although acknowledging the influences on student learning of factors external to the school, administrators in all four districts rejected the tendency of many public school educators to adhere to deficit thinking, that is, to attribute student failure primarily to student and family characteristics and circumstances, and to minimize the power of teachers and principals to make a difference for student success, for example,

- *"[stop] hiding behind some excuses . . . poverty, ESL, kids just recently arrived with no language and no support at home. We did our qualitative research . . . we discovered that even schools where those factors were present were outperforming the province and the rest of the board if they used the right strategies,"*
- *"si les élèves n'ont pas ces résultats-là, souvent (les enseignants) vont dire c'est que l'enfant vient d'un milieu anglo-dominant, les parents ne sont pas assez impliqués . . . avec la question des communautés d'apprentissage professionnelles, ils commencent à regarder 'est-ce-que c'est ma pédagogie qui n'est pas correcte?'"*

District administrator confidence in the collective efficacy of teachers and principals was simply expressed as a statement of belief in two districts. In the others, the administrators highlighted examples of improving schools and successful practices in challenging schools within their own jurisdictions as exemplars to support this argument.

While asserting the power of teachers to influence the outcomes of student learning, district administrators from three of the four districts emphasized parental involvement and support for student learning as the most significant other causal factor:

- *“il y a deux facteurs qui sont parallèles. Un, c’est l’appui des parents à l’éducation de leur enfant . . . je ne veux pas dire les devoirs . . . ensuite c’est la formation du personnel enseignant qui est à jour au niveau des styles d’apprentissage et des processus et des stratégies apprentissage et d’évaluation.”*
- *“active parent involvement in child’s education.”*

The administrators depicted parents of some minority culture groups, particularly recent immigrants, as not providing the kinds of motivational and hands-on support for student learning needed to maximize students’ potential for academic success. They attributed this perceived lack of involvement to differing cultural traditions concerning the locus of responsibility for student success at school, for example,

- *“active parent involvement . . . historically not part of the culture of some newcomer groups,”*
- *“dans les écoles qui sont plus fortes au niveau des diversités culturelles . . . je ne suis pas sûr qu’on a encore le même vocabulaire, la même réaction quand on parle de réussite des élèves. On a beaucoup de difficulté à aller chercher les parents de différentes ethnies.”*

We note that none of the interviewees cited any evidence that parents of other backgrounds were actually more involved and supportive of student learning than those of recent immigrants. It is clear, however, that these administrators were sensitive to the changing cultural and linguistic composition of the communities they served, and to the fact that traditional assumptions about how to best communicate with parents and about parental perspectives on home-school partnerships in children’s learning could not be taken for granted in this context. Because of the perceived importance of parental involvement in supporting their children’s learning (in addition to the primary influence the administrators attributed to teacher beliefs and inputs), administrators were mobilizing the implementation of specific outreach initiatives to strengthen communication and relations with the increasing diversity of cultural, linguistic, religious, and immigration histories of their communities.

Administrators in two of the districts rejected what they portrayed as a common view among teachers that student misbehavior is the major impediment to students' academic success, and that the solution is to apply more rigorously codes of conduct and consequences for student non-compliance with those expectations. One superintendent suggested that student misbehavior was more likely a response to ineffective teaching and learning experiences than the root cause of student academic failure, thereby reasserting the primary influence of teachers' instructional practices and curriculum on students' academic achievements and engagement in school. In rejecting the view that student misbehavior is a major cause of academic failure, these administrators emphasized the view that public school educators are professionally responsible for all students' success.

Ministry initiatives and funding strongly influenced the prognostic or action frames that district administrators invoked to describe how their districts were responding to student learning problems and needs associated with measureable academic achievement. They all referred in positive terms to local implementation of Ministry funded literacy and numeracy initiatives at the elementary school levels, to the Ministry's "Student Success" initiatives at the secondary school level, such as credit recovery procedures and the designation of student success coordinators in schools, and to the use of special funding designated for at-risk student interventions. In one setting the district administrators also talked about implementation of a Ministry initiative designed to provide special assistance to low performing schools where student test scores showed no improvement over consecutive years. In sum, the solution to improving and sustaining the quality of student achievement was commonly framed as implementation of Ministry sponsored policies and programs. In one district, central administrators also described these factors contributing to success: local research and professional development focused on teacher and principal practices correlated to measureable academic success in schools serving high numbers of at-risk students, and local initiatives designed to target academic learning gaps identified through analysis of standardized tests and diagnostic assessments for early intervention.

In addition to the pedagogical solutions to student learning needs associated with the measureable academic achievement frame, the superintendents described district-level efforts to elicit the involvement and support for student learning of parents from culturally diverse communities. This observation was particularly notable in the discourse of central administrators from the English public school board. They talked about ways of educating parent/community stakeholders from distinct minority cultural groups about school system goals and initiatives, as well as about the importance of parents actively partnering with school personnel to motivate and support student learning. They also talked about these interactions as opportunities for public school educators to become more knowledgeable of cultural norms and beliefs in the communities they served, and to adapt, as appropriate, their interactions with parents and students from those communities.

Collective action frames are not simply defined by a core idea. They are constituted by sets of ideas and actions that are assembled into coherent packages by advocates of the frame. The measureable academic achievement frame portrayed by Ontario school district officers commonly includes the following elements:

- (a) Ministry defined standards and numerical indicators of success,
- (b) local evidence of student and school performance on these criteria,
- (c) district priorities for improvement aligned with the Ministry goals and accountability requirements,
- (d) implementation of Ministry funded initiatives that target accountable focuses of student performance,
- (e) analysis of local student/school performance data,
- (f) district initiatives that address accountable performance gaps by student group or by school site,
- (g) school improvement planning processes that require schools to justify their plans using student achievement data, and
- (h) parent involvement and district/school actions to strengthen parental involvement for student learning.

Measureable academic achievement is the dominant student learning frame in the discourse of the district administrators interviewed for



this study. This fact is not surprising because it is the only frame attached to the government accountability system. Our analysis of this frame, however, suggests that in some jurisdictions, district administrators tended to depict the frame mainly in terms of overall performance expectations and levels (targeted and current). In other settings, district administrators have operationalized the frame more deeply into practice. They talked about specific focuses to improve student achievement (areas of curriculum, student sub-groups, schools), and about local teaching and leadership practices that were perceived to make a difference in student performance on the measureable goals and indicators of academic achievement.

Finally, it is important to note that none of the administrators defined student success and the local agenda for student learning solely in terms of measureable academic achievement. Most were quick to state their belief that measurable academic achievement was not the only important dimension of student development, despite the emphasis, pressure, and support emanating from the Ministry. In fact, some criticized the strong Ministry and public emphasis on standardized test results to the exclusion of other goals of education, as explained below, even when they described high levels of performance in their districts, for example,

- *“notre conseil a eu beaucoup de réaction négative a l’effet que les tests de 3e, 6e, 9e, 10e année sont très importants.”*

*Personalized Preparation for Post-Secondary Destinations.* The student learning frame, personalized preparation for post-secondary destinations, refers to the intent to ensure that each student has the knowledge and skills to succeed in whatever phase of continued learning and preparation for employment they enter into upon completion of high school, including university, college, apprenticeship, or directly into the workplace. The interviewees exemplified the frame with references to secondary school programs tailored to student preparation for alternative post-secondary futures in response to and in line with Ministry of Education’s policy and program initiatives associated with this goal.

Several administrators depicted this student learning frame metaphorically as a “journey” or “ramp” leading students towards further

education or workplace destinations, rather than as a set of measurable outcomes. Key to this frame is the idea that students have differing interests and needs that require the provision of alternative program routes that they described as “pathways.” The term “pathways” is rooted in the discourse of current Ministry policy and secondary school program initiatives.

The administrators emphasized the responsibility of a school system to provide adequate preparation for post-secondary success for all students, not simply those planning to seek higher education in university or college. They presented this thought as a counter frame to the academic results focus of the measurable academic achievement frame, and to the priority and status that policy makers, educators, and the public traditionally give to preparation for higher education. It was not clear in our interviews how the administrators viewed the current Ministry policy and program initiatives as different from the traditional practices of streaming high school students into academic and vocational education programs in Ontario public schools since early in the twentieth century. In framing theory, advocates articulate counter frames in opposition or as alternatives to how some other constituencies are framing a social issue. A frame functions as a counter frame because of the way that people use it in relation to other frames.

Although the frame of personalized preparation for post-secondary destinations has an educational outcome orientation, the district administrators did not refer to explicit Ministry or district criteria or procedures to assess this outcome in results terms. They did, however, link the program provisions of this frame to student retention and lowering the secondary school drop out rate, one of the key measures of secondary school success associated with Ministry accountability targets and policies. Perhaps in an effort to mobilize widespread support for this frame and the current initiatives and uses of resources attached to it, the administrators also linked this frame to more universal beliefs and values commonly espoused by public school educators, such as individualizing programming to student needs, developing students’ self esteem, developing students’ capacity and disposition to be lifelong learners, and preparing to be productive citizens. In framing theory, these discursive tactics would be described as frame bridging (i.e., linking this frame to the

measurable outcomes frame) and frame amplification (i.e., emphasizing the resonance of the frame with key beliefs and values).

The English public and Catholic school districts sampled for this study both serve socio-economically, culturally diverse, large, urban communities. The two French language districts served large urban centres, medium-sized cities, and rural communities across a broad region of Ontario. The degree of socio-economic diversity may not be greater than in the English-medium districts, but it tends to be geographically dispersed as one moves out of the more metropolitan areas. District administrators in the French language districts talked about differences in parent aspirations and expectations for post-secondary destinations among the communities served in different regions of the board. In short, they claimed that parents in some of the more rural areas were less concerned about academic outcomes than those in the larger urban centres, and that district educators needed to be equally responsive to the differing educational interests and aims of families from all quarters.

As a student learning frame, personalized preparation for post-secondary destinations connects the following ideas and actions: (a) conceptions of alternative post-secondary destinations, (b) variable student/parent aspirations, (c) the responsibility of public school educators to prepare students in line with their post-secondary aspirations, (d) implementation of Ministry policy and program initiatives related to this frame, and (e) effects on students' personal development, engagement, and retention in secondary school. In addition to measurable academic achievement, preparation for post-secondary destinations is the only other common core frame in the administrators' discourse on student learning that they linked to government policies and initiatives.

*The "Whole Child" and Other Student Learning Frames.* Collective action framing scholars distinguish distinct core frames from more encompassing "master frames" (Benford & Snow, 2000). In all the districts sampled, district administrators referred to their commitment to teaching or developing "the whole child," for example,

- "teach the whole child,"
- "our philosophy is to develop the whole student,"
- "education of the whole child,"

- *“la globalité de l’être . . . c’est une réussite plus globale.”*

The concept is used as a catch phrase for a complex frame that encompasses multiple dimensions of student learning, including but not limited to academic outcomes. We see the whole child frame operating as a master frame in the discourse on student learning that its advocates construct in ways to allow them to strategically incorporate multiple core frames under a single umbrella.

Although our respondents agreed about the existence and centrality of the whole child frame to the public education agenda for student learning, we found variability in what core frames they chose to include and highlight within this master frame. In addition to academic achievement, the list of core frames that one or more of the district administrators interviewed embraced within the whole child master frame includes: (a) a well-rounded education, (b) personal development, (c) faith/values-based education, and (d) social identity development. As explained below, variability in the discursive content of the whole child frame is linked to differences in the district contexts.

Two elements of the whole child frame across our sample were consistent in how district administrators constructed the frame. First, it is presented as a counter-frame to an exclusive emphasis on the measurable academic achievement frame that they associated with the government accountability system, for example,

- *“c’est tout le développement de la personne, pas juste des notes,”*
- *“protect the whole learning experience . . . more than outcomes . . . more than academic achievement.”*

Second, within the whole child master frame, they all included a core frame that we have labeled “a well-rounded education.” In their terms, a well-rounded education refers most specifically to the provision of non-academic educational opportunities and experiences through the regular program and the extra-curricular activities in school, for example,

- *“a good arts program,”*

- *“education of the whole child does require a focus on the arts, a focus on athletics, a focus on developing socially responsible citizens,”*
- *“ils ont pu se réaliser dans les expériences non seulement académiques mais aussi parascolaires.”*

Several district administrators highlighted annual district events where individual student participation in and excellence in these non-academic dimensions of school activity are recognized and rewarded, for example,

- *“I think we put our actions behind those words based on how we recognize student success on an annual basis . . . [in a] . . . variety of venues.”*
- *“à chaque mois à l’intérieur des bonnes nouvelles du Conseil, on met en évidence tous les succès de tous les élèves, alors que ce soit académique, social, sportif ou théâtral.”*

In contrast to the measureable academic achievement frame, the direction of district and school accountability for providing a well rounded education is more towards the students and parents in the communities served, than to government authorities. It is measured by the symbolic act of organizing ceremonies to highlight the value and attention that school districts give to these non-academic dimensions of student development and experiences. The district officials justified this student learning frame as a manifestation of district philosophy, and as an appeal to traditional educator beliefs that students have varying abilities and interests (not just academic) and that schools should provide opportunities for students to experience in success in multiple ways.

Several of the district administrators extended the whole child master frame explicitly to students’ personal development, more specifically to their self-esteem and self-confidence as individuals and as members of the school community, for example,

- *“si l’élève est bien à l’école, bien dans sa peau, il vient avec son identité.”*

This agenda for student learning was typically discussed in conjunction with the provision of educational experiences intended to provide students with a well-rounded education, the argument being that successful

personal development depended on more than provisions for and recognition of academic learning and achievement. Student learning associated with this frame is also portrayed as linked to and important to student engagement and the attainment of measurable targets for student retention and high school completion. The respondents did not explicitly link this frame to government policy and programs.

District administrators from the Catholic school districts in our sample identified and elaborated the faith/values-based education frame, particularly by administrators from the English Catholic school district. This frame and its inclusion as part of the broader whole child development frame is, therefore, more context dependent than the other core frames mentioned. District goals articulated within the faith/values-based education frame include instilling students with belief systems grounded in core tenets of Catholicism, commitment to the Catholic faith and church, and retention in the Catholic school system in the transition from elementary to secondary schools. The delivery of educational experiences to support this frame include programs and activities designed to satisfy the religious education requirements and expectations that Catholic Church authorities prescribe under the legislative mandate of the Ministry of Education, and other (vaguely specified) student experiences that would be associated with developing values and goals, like “carism” (i.e., caring for others) and becoming “discerning believers.” One argument presented in support of this frame was that schools have replaced local parishes as the main link between the Catholic Church and students. Sustainability of the church as an institution is closely linked to this student learning frame.

Social identity development is the final core frame identified in our analysis of central office administrators’ discourse on the agenda for student learning. This frame is closely linked to the personal development theme to the extent that feeling good about oneself as an individual person is intimately connected to one’s sense of social group identity and affiliation. The most distinct version of this core frame appears in the discourse of administrators from the French language school districts, where the official mandate and mission of the school boards is grounded in a commitment to the preservation of the francophone minority in On-

tario as a linguistic, albeit increasingly culturally/ethnically diverse, community, for example,

- *“pour nos écoles, si on ne part pas avec une identité francophone, on a manqué le bateau,”*
- *“ils se sont identifiés comme francophones.”*

Within the French language school districts, administrators referred not just to maintenance of French language proficiency, but also of a franco-phone identity, and to the particular challenges for language development and performance in a minority language context where some parents might not be fluent and literate in French, and where children’s proficiency in French upon entering the system might be quite varied. The solution is framed with reference to implementation of the Ministry of Education’s *politique d’aménagement linguistique*, a policy unique to the French language districts.

A second version of the social identity development frame appeared in the discourse of district administrators from the English public school district. We use the phrase “living in and for a socially diverse world” to capture and communicate the essence of this frame. The frame acknowledges and embraces the demographic reality of the growing ethno-cultural and linguistic diversity of the metropolitan Toronto and the adjacent suburban regions that surround it, for example,

- *“the high degree of ethnic and cultural diversity we have in our school board has to be a priority.”*

In this frame social diversity is portrayed as a positive development. The school system was depicted as having a responsibility to value and reflect that diversity, and to prepare students to live harmoniously in a pluralistic society. The administrators amplified this frame by linking it to broader societal values such as “achieving equity for students” and “developing socially responsible citizens.” The educational response presented in this discourse includes

(a) staff development, for example

- *“our focus is giving our teachers and our principals the skills to understand ethnic diversity and the uniqueness it brings with it to our schools,”*
- (b) implementing policies and practices that promote respect for cultural differences, and
- (c) engagement with diverse faith and cultural communities to learn about their expectations and to educate them about how they can be active partners in their children’s learning, for example,
  - *“we are physically reaching out to all faiths and cultures because our newest communities come with no history of being actively day-to-day involved in school.”*

#### COMMENTARY

In this article, we have examined the contemporary agenda for student learning as communicated in interviews with superintendent-level administrators from four Ontario school districts (English public, English Catholic, French public, French Catholic). Using theoretical concepts and research methods drawn from traditions of collective frame analysis in the study of social movements, we identified six core frames at play in the superintendents’ discourse on student learning: (a) measureable academic achievement, (b) personalized preparation for post-secondary destinations, (c) a well-rounded education, (d) personal development, (e) faith/values-based education, and (f) social identity development. Our analysis also led us to recognize a broader frame, characterized as developing “the whole child,” that the superintendents employed as a way to expand the agenda for student learning beyond the education policy and accountability dominant focus on academic performance and success. In constructing the whole child frame, which we liken to what social action framing theorists call a master frame, the superintendents essentially cobble together multiple core frames to construct, present, and advocate a multi-dimensional agenda for student learning in public education. The district administrators did not reject the academic achievement goals articulated in public policy and the education accountability system; however, they did argue that there are other legitimate and important goals for student learning and development (e.g., faith/values education, social identity development), and that attention to some of these (e.g.,



those concerned with having a well-rounded education and personal development) has important consequences for student engagement and academic success in schools.

We have come to understand the frames identified in district administrators' talk about the agenda for student learning as constituted within a discursive field:

to understand the framing process we should center our investigations on the *discursive fields* within which the framing process takes place. Such fields contain the genres that collective actors can draw upon to construct discursively diagnosis, prognosis and motivation. They are historically and contextually dependent. (Steinberg, 1998, p. 856, italics in the original)

From this perspective the discursive field that constitutes the public agenda for student learning consists of terms and phrases that signify (a) conceptions of educational goals, (b) education policies of the government and school districts, (c) government and local actions focused on improving and/or sustaining the quality of student learning, (d) evidence of current student and school performance, (e) claims about salient needs for improvement in student learning and about causal factors that influence student learning, and (f) arguments about the professional responsibilities for student learning and development of educators in the public school systems. Metaphorically, one can imagine this discursive field as an array of points like stars in the sky. Education stakeholders (in our case, district administrators) draw upon different points in the discursive field to construct and articulate constellations of ideas and actions in words to represent different core frames.

Our analysis indicates that the specific configurations that these core frame constellations take can vary, and that the degree and nature of that variability is both role and context dependent. Thus, all stakeholders might agree on the presence of a measurable academic achievement frame for student learning, but attribute the major causes of student learning to different factors. Many of the district office administrators that we interviewed, for example, explicitly rejected the view that student learning is more dependent on student and family characteristics and on student (mis)behavior than on the actions of teachers and principals with support from the district and province. Furthermore, we

found that superintendents in some district contexts more complexly developed and communicated some common core frames. In particular, the interviewees in two of the districts that we sampled presented detailed accounts of student learning performance and needs related to the measurable academic achievement frame, and described specific district policy and program initiatives to address those gaps. This variability may arise from the degree to which the decisions, actions, understanding, and commitment of school district personnel concerning student learning are being operationalized within the frame over time. Further research is needed to better understand what gives rise to variation in complexity within frames across settings.

Our analysis also revealed that superintendents draw selectively upon the overall array of ideas and actions available to them in the discursive field that characterizes the agenda for student learning, and that this selectivity is often context dependent. Thus, the faith/values education core frame was distinct to the Catholic district administrators, and administrators in the francophone school districts constructed the social identity development frame differently from their English district counterparts.

Insomuch as they constructed and used multiple frames when they talked about the agenda for student learning, it is appropriate to think of education stakeholders like these superintendents creating and using collective action frame repertoires (Tilly, as cited in Steinberg, 1998), not merely developing and advocating single frames in their discourse. In effect, the district administrators construct, define, and use these collective action frame repertoires to shape and influence the district agenda for student learning. We found a common tendency among the superintendents across our interview sample to assemble the variety of core frames within their individual and shared (within district) frame repertoires into a more inclusive master frame: the whole child. Although the specific core frame ingredients of the whole child master frame may differ from setting to setting, the basic master framing strategy is common across our data. In constructing the whole child master frame, the superintendents did not merely juxtapose the different core frames in a side-by-side configuration. Rather, they asserted relationships among them, using such framing processes as (a) frame bridging (e.g., linking non-

academic frames to the dominant measurable academic performance outcome expectations) and (b) frame amplification (e.g., appealing to more universal beliefs and values that resonate with multiple frames, such as individualization of student needs and educational experiences, and equity in educational experiences and outcomes for all students). To go back to the metaphor, we suggest that the repertoires of core frames that superintendents brought together under the whole child master frame can intersect and share different points in the overall discursive field, so that the master frame becomes more like a network of constellations than a set of independently constructed distinct core frames.

### CONCLUSION

We note that although the whole child frame agenda for student learning is common across our sample of district administrators and districts, it is not the dominant frame. The dominant frame is the measurable academic achievement core frame that is fundamentally driven by provincial government curriculum standards, standardized tests, and targets for student performance (test scores, high school graduation rates). Although the district administrators interviewed embraced the measurable achievement frame, the language they used to advocate the whole child master frame was overtly defensive. They explicitly and consistently argued that the agenda for student learning was not just about measurable academic performance, but also about other core frames singly and together. In this sense, they came across as guardians and defenders of a broader agenda for public education than that which the Ministry of Education formally promoted and supported through its outcomes and target-based curriculum and accountability system. At the same time, the district administrators advocated a version of the academic achievement frame that differed from what they portrayed as traditional views of many educational professionals. They argued that school personnel have the professional responsibility, knowledge, and skills to help all students succeed academically, and that deficit thinking, whereby school personnel attribute student failure to student and family characteristics and circumstances beyond what educators can influence, has no place in today's schools. We interpret this attempt by district administrators to redefine traditional views concerning the causes of students' academic

success as an example of what framing theorists call a frame transformation process.

This analysis illustrates the potential of collective action framing theory and research methods as an approach to policy analysis in the public education sector. As a framing study, however, the analysis focuses mainly on identifying and comparing the content of the frames evident in the discourse on the agenda for student learning within a particular stakeholder group: school district administrators. Future uses of framing theory and methods for studying and analyzing public policy debates in education could be strengthened in two significant ways. The first would be to tap into and compare how different stakeholder groups (e.g., teachers, professional associations, media, parent and community organizations) frame the same policy issue, in this case, the agenda for student learning. The second would be to situate the use of the frames by different constituencies within the specific discursive contexts in which they are invoked, and to track how the frames are used to influence the policy agenda and to mobilize collective action within and between different education stakeholder groups in particular settings.

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